

# RPG Reload File 028 – 'Phantasy Star 2'

[March 5, 2015](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where men get discounts on piano lessons for reasons not divulged in the localization. Each week, we jump into the time tunnel and grab an RPG from the App Store's past to give it a play in modern times. It's a bit of revisiting, a bit of reflection, and a chance to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow for. The RPG genre is a wide one with a lot of different kinds of games in it, and I try to present a good variety in this feature from week to week. To help me out with that, I turn to you, the reader, to choose what I'm playing once a month. Today's article is one such reader's choice, and the next one at the beginning of April could be yours! All you have to do is tell me the name of the game you'd like to see me play in the comments below, in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums, or by via a tweet to [@RPGReload](#). I'll randomly choose a winner each time, so even if your choice is unpopular, it still has a chance. Go for it!



This week's entry, like many of the games we cover here, is an interesting case. The *Phantasy Star* brand has cast a fairly wide net over the years, with its most popular entries being in the *Phantasy Star Online* series that started on SEGA's last piece of gaming hardware, the Dreamcast. The series got its start, of course, as a single-player JRPG series that spanned two generations of hardware. For whatever reason, SEGA brought just one of the classic games to iOS during that brief period of time where they were tossing Genesis games out by the bunch. So we're left with the odd situation of neither the first nor last title being available to iOS gamers, but one of the middle installments. At least it's the more well-regarded of the two middle chapters. As it happens to be the only one on iOS, I'm going to be talking about *Phantasy Star 2* [\(Free\)](#) specifically in this article, but you just know I can't resist using it as an excuse to talk about the entire original series.

It was 1987 and SEGA was in what we know now to be their natural state. They were struggling, and badly. In the Japanese market, their SEGA Mark III hardware had failed to put even the smallest dent in the mighty Nintendo Famicom's marketshare, and new competitors were on the way soon. In America, SEGA's Master System was faring even worse. There were plenty of

reasons for that that go beyond the scope of this article, but one of the issues was that while SEGA had a powerful library of popular arcade hits to port to their home consoles, the audience was starting to look for more meaty experiences. Enix's *Dragon Quest* ([\\$2.99](#)) had completely changed the nature of the market in Japan, and though the market was relatively new in the US at the time, Nintendo obviously had expectations of similar success for titles of that nature in the region. Thanks to the conditions third parties had to agree to in order to develop for the Famicom by then, trying to woo them over to a failing system was nearly out of the question. The people wanted RPGs, and if SEGA wanted one on their platform, they were going to have to provide it themselves.



You have to give SEGA credit. They turned out a firecracker of a game with the first *Phantasy Star*. It helped that the game was a technological marvel of sorts. Taking up a whopping 4 megabits, the game featured well-animated enemy sprites and smoothly scrolling first-person dungeons, an unbelievable achievement from then-unknown programmer Yuji Naka, who would, with many other of his fellow team members, go on to practice similar wizardry with the *Sonic The Hedgehog* ([Free](#)) series. Japanese players who

owned an optional add-on for their consoles could enjoy a beautiful FM soundtrack. Unlike *Dragon Quest*, there was no need to scribble down a huge password, since the game included battery back-up that allowed players to save up to five files. The game made its way over to America quite swiftly by the standards of the period, with US gamers able to play it only about a half-year after its Japanese launch, more than a year before *Dragon Quest* would make the jump on the NES. You had to be willing to throw down some serious money, however, as the size of the game meant it had to be sold for an unprecedented \$70, the most expensive game of its time by some measure.

Its technical achievements only tell part of the story, however. Instead of going down the path of least resistance and making their own sword and sorcery RPG, SEGA opted to set their game in a science-fiction universe. The characters were brought to life by designer Rieko Kodama, who would take an increasing role in the series as time passed, eventually ending up in the director's chair for the fourth installment. She would also serve as a producer for *Skies Of Arcadia* and *7th Dragon*, among other titles. The setting was quite unique, and the story that took place within it lived up to that. Keep in mind that at this time, most RPG stories hadn't ventured far beyond a nameless hero setting out to battle an evil guy who had kidnapped a princess and/or threatened the world. *Phantasy Star* told the story of a solar system ruled by a once-kind king named Lassic, who had turned sour after changing to a new religion. When a rebel leader named Nero is assassinated by the king's robots, his sister Alis picks up her sword to get revenge. Her adventure carries her across multiple planets, where she meets an interesting cast of characters who help her find a different reason to fight.



It was an excellent game and a rare opportunity for SEGA kids to stick their tongues out at their NES-owning friends. It also did quite well for SEGA, at least as well as could be expected given the limited success of the platform it was on. With new hardware on the way, most of the original game's team got to work on a sequel to provide SEGA with a solid launch window RPG. There was a new director and writer, and Rieko Kodama was bumped up from character design to lead designer. Yuji Naka returned as the main programmer for what would be his last turn on the classic series, though his first-person dungeons didn't make the jump with him. *Phantasy Star 2* would deliver an adventure even bigger than the first game, requiring a record-breaking 6 megabit cartridge to fit all of its gorgeous 16-bit graphics and pulse-pounding soundtrack into. It was a pretty big hit all-around, leading to two more Genesis installments that I'm not going to talk much about today. The controversial *Phantasy Star 3*, developed by an entirely different team, hit just a year after the second game in 1990/1991, while *Phantasy Star 4* would arrive in 1993/1994 from an expanded team that included most of the *Phantasy Star 2* staff. These two games in particular really should be available on iOS, and that's all I'm going to say about that.



*Phantasy Star 2* is from a fairly early period in JRPG history, and it's important to keep that context in mind as you play it. Its release predates *Dragon Quest 4* ([\\$14.99](#)) and *Final Fantasy 3* ([\\$14.99](#)) by around a year, and its team was relatively inexperienced in developing more substantial titles like this. Possibly as a result, this is actually the longest game in the classic series, albeit by a hair. Unfortunately, it doesn't get there entirely through having a ton of content. You'll probably spend half of your time playing the game grinding, trying to earn the precious experience and meseta (*Phantasy Star's* currency) you'll need to survive the ruthless dungeons. Like many games of this vintage, *Phantasy Star 2* is at its least enjoyable in the opening couple of hours. Your characters are dangerously weak, your party is nowhere near full, and your battle options are few. The early strategy amounts to little more than going out, fighting a few battles against whatever random enemies you can kill, then heading back to town to rest up. Repeat that process until you can afford some new gear and have padded out your hit points enough to drag yourself to the next location.



It probably doesn't help that the battle system is initially very confusing. To *Phantasy Star 2's* credit, although there are an awful lot of battles, they move

fast. That speed, when combined with the unusual visual presentation and the forward-thinking auto-battle system, will leave a lot of starting players scratching their heads after their first few fights, wondering just what happened. Once you get used to it, the battle system in the game is actually quite good. It's turn-based, but once you've put your orders in, your party members will more or less carry on themselves unless you push the button again to interrupt. If you have a character use a tech (*Phantasy Star's* magic, more or less), they'll fire it off that turn and then go back to attacking after that. This makes battles against easier foes a breeze. If all you need to do is use the fight command, you only need to hit one button for the whole battle. So, while in the start you might be turned off, in the long run you're going to appreciate it quite a bit. Many things in *Phantasy Star 2* follow this pattern.

One element that doesn't is the dreadful design of the dungeons. Although the sequel switched from first-person to overhead, the dungeons feel like they were designed as first-person dungeons. They're labyrinthine and make liberal use of similar wall tiles, winding paths, and transporters to do their best to get you completely and utterly lost. Adding to the woes is a parallax layer that sits on top of most of the dungeons, slightly obscuring your view and contributing to your disorientation. Not many JRPGs with overhead dungeons require you to make maps, but you'll probably want to do it for *Phantasy Star 2*. The dungeons are also unfortunately light on loot, so your typical reward for choosing an incorrect path is just a dead end and another 10 fights to get back to where you were. There are some cool touches in some of these locations, like the tubes containing experimental creatures you'll come across in the research lab, but the few highlights don't compensate for how unpleasant it is to play them. It's a problem right from the first dungeon, and unlike most aspects of the game, it never really gets any better.



So if you spend half the game grinding, and at least half of the other half navigating awful dungeons, why do people like this game as well as they do? I think it comes down to a few points. First, the combat system is fast and exciting, a rarity in its period. Second, the presentation is excellent. The graphics are rich and colorful, and the soundtrack makes excellent use of the Genesis's Yamaha FM synthesizer to produce fast-paced, percussion-heavy, techno-futuristic tunes. The game makes great use of still portraits and larger illustrations for important scenes, and the enemies have a surprising range of animation that makes them feel alive. This would all be for naught were it not for another major strength of the game (and indeed, the series on the whole), its compelling world design. There's something very distinct about *Phantasy Star's* art direction and overall setting, and unlike many visions of the future from far in the past, it still holds up fairly well today. SEGA still produces the occasional *Phantasy Star*-branded title, and I think it speaks volumes that they barely have to modify the original design motif. The game's setting still feels fresh today, providing a pleasant oasis in a desert filled with the grains of sand that are fantasy RPGs.

If I had to point at the biggest reason *Phantasy Star 2* is beloved, though, it



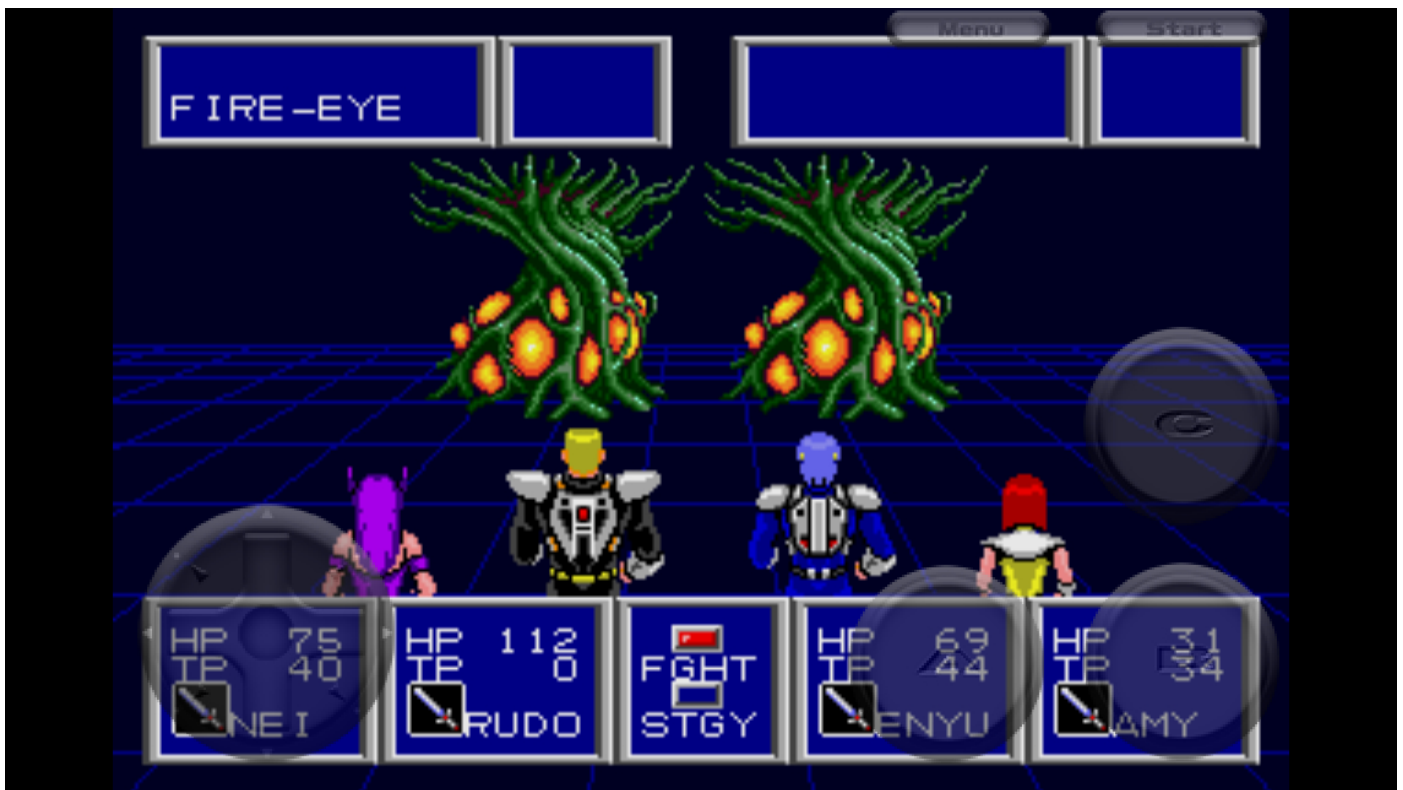
would have to be the story. While the characters are little more than crude outlines with a few sentences of back story each, the plot that drives them is excellent. There are more dramatic twists and shocks than just about any other RPG of its age, and its ambitious attempts at social commentary resonate eerily well in modern times. Many of the things *Final Fantasy* ([\\$7.99](#)) would become famous for were done earlier in *Phantasy Star*, and just as effectively. That all of this was conveyed without the translation completely screwing it up is a minor miracle. While SEGA did goof up some details that resulted in obscuring the continuity between the first game and this one, the text on its own is remarkably well-written, with few of the errors and nonsensical grammar that plagued most translations of the era. Most of its punches have been done to death by now, reducing their impact somewhat, but the ending is still something to behold.



I'm going to go into **spoiler** territory for the next little bit. If you haven't played the game yet and want to enjoy all of the surprises the story has to offer, scroll on down about four paragraphs. I just can't do a write-up of *Phantasy Star 2*'s story proper justice without getting into the juicy details. **This is your final warning, friends.**

*Phantasy Star 2* wasn't the first RPG to have a party member die in its story. I can't even begin to guess which game was, but just a few months before in Japan, *Final Fantasy 2* ([\\$7.99](#)) had released, featuring the dramatic deaths of no less than three party members. That said, the death of Nei at around the halfway point of the game may have been the first time it actually hurt. In the case of the *Final Fantasy 2* characters, they were all rotating "fourth" members who you knew would be leaving your party by hook or by crook at some point. They also weren't with you terribly long, so you probably didn't get seriously invested in them. Not so with Nei. She forces her way into your group at the very beginning, and from that point on, you can't leave her behind. She is always in your party, and she doesn't drag you down by any means. She's actually incredibly strong and even has some useful techs that make her even better. Her equipment upgrades are easier on the wallet than most of the other characters, so it's easy to keep her up to date. You can't switch her out for any of the other characters you come across, but odds are that you wouldn't want to even if you could.

It's her sacrifice that has the most profound personal effect on the story. It's totally unexpected, a real gut-punch. "Don't let them ever repeat the mistake they made when they made me", she says in her final speech. You then have to fight a shorthanded battle while you're still probably shell-shocked, and it's hard not to feel the emotions run. When *Final Fantasy 7*'s Sephiroth kills Aerith, he denies you your chance at immediate revenge, which itself was a clever change from the usual. Here, you can immediately exact your vengeance on Nei's killer. Once you do, the proverbial spit hits the fan. The world starts flooding, and the only way to fix the problem is to defy Mother Brain, the artificial intelligence that guides the solar system. As a nice touch, you can at this point go to the clone lab where you usually go to revive dead characters and try to bring Nei back. Many games don't bother to explain why their gamey bits don't work for plot-related deaths, but *Phantasy Star 2* predicts you will give it a try. Nei isn't human, the attendant says, so the process doesn't work. All the attendant can do is offer you a nice place to lay her to rest and a few words to try to cheer you up. They don't really work.



Your reward for stopping the flooding is to be sent to a prison satellite above the planet, where Mother Brain's twisted plans become a lot clearer. While you try to escape, still bound and unable to fight back against any enemies you run into, the whole satellite goes into alert status. Mother Brain has decided to smash the satellite into Palm, the heavily-populated capital planet of the solar system. The impact destroys Palm, and just like that, one of the main settings of the first *Phantasy Star*, Alis's home planet, is gone. You're rescued by a space pirate in one of those lovely *deus ex machina* that these kinds of stories rely on, and are directed to the only planet that hasn't relied on Mother Brain: the hostile world of Dezo, where one of the characters from the first game waits to guide you. It eventually culminates in you and your party storming the spaceship that houses Mother Brain. You run into the boss of the first game in what proves to be the toughest fight in *Phantasy Star 2*, and while you might think finishing the fight with both Dark Force and Mother Brain will give you an ending, you're not quite done yet.

As you're preparing to abandon the ship, you're informed that there are still occupants on board. It turns out the creators of Mother Brain and the hands behind almost everything that has happened during the game are none other

than the last Earthlings. Having tapped the resources of Earth to the point that the planet was no longer habitable, they ventured out into space to find a new home. Deeming your system suitable, they created Mother Brain to trick the indigenous people into becoming soft and overly-reliant on the computer. Their plan was to take your home planet Mota for their own, after exterminating the current residents, of course. Surrounded by hundreds of these robed Earthlings, a climactic battle between the heroes of Mota and the invading force begins. Every character gets one last chance to spout off a moral of some sort, accompanied with a cool-looking picture of them fighting. The outcome of the battle is not shown. We can make vague guesses at what happened by what *Phantasy Star 4* says, but that's about it.



**If you're skipping spoilers, it's safe to resume reading here.** Cataclysmic happenings, personal loss, a huge twist, and an open ending. All of this and more in a JRPG from 1989. It's not easy to stick with *Phantasy Star 2* at times. Somewhere in the grinding and trying to find your way through another ridiculous dungeon, you might want to stop. If you have the fortitude to see it through, however, it pays in dividends. There are plenty of fans even now, more than 20 years after the last proper installment, who wish for a

*Phantasy Star 5*. That kind of dedication doesn't come cheaply. Playing *Phantasy Star 2* through to its conclusion will probably demonstrate nicely as to why they're still hoping against all hope. Unfortunately, some things just can't be revived, no matter how much we want them to be. That doesn't mean we can't still enjoy these great games, though, and if you haven't experienced a *Phantasy Star* game yet, you really ought to.

As for this version, it's using SEGA's questionable emulator that houses most of their Genesis ports to iOS. The sound is off, but everything runs more or less as it should. With the game being a turn-based RPG, the controls work well enough. As the app is fairly old by now and only updated when broken, things like support for iCloud, MFi controllers, or bigger screens are not included and likely never will be. The game includes a software manual that doesn't help you as far as what various techs do and things like that, a far cry from the 100+ page guide that was bundled with the original game. You'll probably have to look up an FAQ for help with that. You can hard save the same way as in the original game, at a data storage location adorably marked with a floppy disk. The game will always resume where you left off when you come back to it, but be careful to make a proper save now and then in case you die. It's also not a universal app, but it scales to the iPad well enough, I suppose. There are better ways to play this game, including the two PlayStation 2 *SEGA Ages* releases, but they're all generally unavailable to Western gamers. I suppose for three dollars, it's hard to complain much.





*Phantasy Star 2* is still a great game, even though the parts of it that didn't work then feel even worse now. If you've got patience for a rocky beginning and aren't afraid to make (or look up) maps, I think it's well worth playing even in modern times. That's just what I think, though. What do you guys think of the game? I want to know, so fill me by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). Don't forget to vote for the next reader's choice while you're at it! Also, feel free to poke SEGA about getting the other *Phantasy Star* games on iOS. It might work! As for me, I'll be back next week with another vintage RPG. Thanks for reading!

**Next Week's Reload Hint:** *It's a brilliant, polished, and dazzling strategy RPG!*